








DOI: 10.1111/joac.12440

SYMPOSIUM ARTICLE

Journal of
Agrarian Change

WILEY

Introduction: Covid-19 and the conditions and struggles of agrarian classes of labour

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Abstract

Covid-19 generated a crisis in capitalism, but not of capitalism. Capitalism reproduces itself in crisis and in ways that have significant but uneven impacts on the conditions and struggles of agrarian classes of labour. This article explores preliminary studies of how Covid-19 has affected agrarian social formations in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the farmers, petty commodity producers, labourers and agribusinesses who populate them. It considers some of the implications for wage-labour, agriculture, accumulation and social reproduction including care work. And it briefly considers Covid-19's political impacts—in terms of the role of the state and possibilities for challenging capitalism, its violence and its ecological crisis.

KEYWORDS

agribusiness, Covid-19, labour, small farmers

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1 | INTRODUCTION

How has Covid-19 affected agrarian social formations and the social classes and groups within them? Which commodity circuits have been disrupted and to what degree? Will capital continue to extract ecological surpluses in the same ways and to the same extent? What have the changes meant for struggles between different classes of capital and between capital and different classes of labour? To what extent and in what ways has reproductive labour been intensified? How much has accumulation been constrained, where and for how long? To what extent and why have the conditions of classes of labour deteriorated? We asked the authors of this symposium to address such questions in relation to the agrarian social formations that they study.

It is still too early to give clear-cut answers to these questions. The Covid-19 global health crisis and its socio-economic consequences continue to unfold, in ways that are largely shaped by dynamics of capitalist development that predate Covid-19. This symposium limits itself to preliminary indications of trends and to underlining the unevenness of Covid-19's impacts from an agrarian political economy perspective. The introduction links existing patterns to broad empirical evidence from particular countries, including those discussed in this symposium's articles. By exploring how specific social formations have been affected to this point, we can shed some light on the dynamics of global capitalism during the Covid-19 pandemic and its implications for class relations, geographies of capital accumulation and, perhaps, for struggles against exploitation, patriarchy and racism.

This is a health crisis whose very provenance relates to how capital expands through the extraction of natural resources, the exploitation of labour (in both its reproductive and productive forms), intra-capitalist competition and institutional mediations—above all those of the state. Pandemics are not a new phenomenon, but most agree that the dynamics of global capitalism, which reduce biodiversity, also erode the barriers to cross-species transmission of certain viruses. Analyses of Covid-19 have linked the pandemic to contemporary capitalism in a variety of ways. These include more specific links such as Akram-Lodhi's (2021) reference to industrial livestock farming's enhanced ability to provide breeding grounds for viruses due to the impaired immunity of intensively-reared animals and more general links such as the 'socio-ecological crisis caused by agrarian extractivism' (McKay et al., 2021; Svampa, 2021), land use changes and unsustainable global consumption patterns (IPBES, 2020) and, even more broadly, 'decades of violent and unregulated neoliberal extractivism' (Harvey, 2020).

The capitalist world food system, widely inflected by neoliberal policy priorities and structured as just-in-time supply chains, revealed its vulnerabilities to an unprecedented degree in 2020 (Akram-Lodhi, 2021; Clapp & Moseley, 2020). Although big tech and finance capital were largely impervious to the disruptions, agrarian capital faced sizeable challenges, particularly in the early months of the pandemic. Flows of some commodities slowed or ground to a halt for a time. The compressions of time and space that have marked capitalism's development, seemed, for a moment, to be reversing.

Agribusiness, though, soon saw its fortunes rebound.¹ And world agricultural and food import values only saw significant drops in April and May of 2020 (FAO, 2021). Looking a little closer, the largest drops in agricultural trade in relative terms were exports from Africa, followed by exports from Oceania and Asia (FAO, 2021). Meanwhile small farmers—be they petty capitalists or petty commodity producers—have suffered uneven impacts of varying duration in ways that are addressed by some of the contributors to this symposium (McBurney et al., 2021, this issue; Zhang & Hu, 2021, this issue).

The impacts have been most obvious and clear-cut for those classes of labour who combine precarious casual labour with petty commodity production and the reproductive labour that underpins wage-labour—such as the Ghanaian women who combine small family farming with long-distance trading (see Baada et al., 2021, this issue). In January 2021, the ILO (2021, pp. 2, 11) estimated that global labour income had fallen by 8.3% in 2020 and projected an estimated 3% drop in working hours in 2021, equivalent to a loss of 108 million 40-h a week jobs. As has

¹Standard & Poor's Global Agribusiness Index has shown that the market value of 24 of the biggest world agribusiness companies has steadily increased since April 2020 (<https://www.spglobal.com/spdji/en/indices/equity/sp-global-agribusiness-equity-index/#overview>).

usually been the case historically (Davis, 2001; Sen, 1983), growing hunger and under-nutrition (which the FAO et al., 2020, p. 18, estimated would have been affecting an estimated *additional* 83 to 135 million by the end of 2020) has not been primarily driven by issues of food availability but by reduced incomes and falling access to wage-labour (e.g., FAS, 2020, on India; Hossain et al., 2020, on Bangladesh; Le Nestour & Moscoviz, 2020, on Senegal). Total wages have fallen most sharply for the low-paid, and for women more than men (ILO, 2020, p. 15).

Reproductive labour, always gendered and often racialized and class-based (Fraser 2017), had already been intensified within households by increased privatization of healthcare and education in some parts of the world and by the legacy of neo-colonial structural adjustment in others (Dowling, 2021). It has been widely intensified by Covid-19 (Stevano et al., 2021). In a number of countries (e.g., Uganda), schools have closed for an entire year, whereas access to all forms of healthcare have been widely constrained. Geographies of social reproduction have also been affected: the first months of the pandemic saw millions return to the countryside, increasing its role in processes of social reproduction. In India, this mass return of mostly male migrant workers and their loss of wages has squeezed the material bases for household reproduction and increased women's work burdens (Dutta et al., 2020; Lahariya, 2020). There is also evidence that the return of male migrants squeezed women's access to agricultural wage-labour (Niyati, 2021), impacts that become more uneven as some migrants return to the city (Ruthven, 2021, this issue).

More broadly the crisis has revealed the degree to which the capitalist world food system depends on often overtly racist and casteist regimes of migrant exploitation (Xiuhtecutli & Shattuck, 2021), which have been made worse by migrant food-workers disproportionate exposure to Covid-19 (Maxmen, 2021). The crisis has also illustrated the gendered and racialized nature of care work and reproductive labour (Stevano et al., 2021), and capitalism's growing indifference to providing even for the global population's simple reproduction (Bernstein, 2006).

The pivotal role of the state has become more evident—in terms of its channelling and regulating of competition between segments of capital (in relation to large pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer and Astra Zeneca, for example), its varying capacities to prime surges of accumulation, temporarily boost support for social reproduction, own and accelerate vaccination programmes and, in some cases, control spikes in Covid-19 infections in the first place (e.g., Vietnam).

Covid-19 appears to have accelerated existing trends within the competitive dynamics of the global capitalist economy, at least for a time. Antagonisms between larger and smaller capital have also become more obvious in some places, not least in India where the state has used the time of crisis to intensify its attempts to increase large-scale agribusiness's control over the country's agricultural commodity chains by pushing ahead with new agribusiness-friendly farm laws (Shrimali, 2020).

There is an emerging consensus on the increase in regional and social inequalities. Evidence shows that Covid-19 has hit the world's poorest countries and regions hardest in terms of material impacts. The World Bank has estimated that those living in poverty rose by around 120 million in 2020 and were projected to rise by close to 150 million in 2021 before devastating new waves of Covid-19 struck South Asia (Lakner et al., 2021). Poverty levels have risen most in Africa and South Asia, with around 80% of the 62 million estimated to have fallen into extreme poverty in 2020 living in those regions (Lakner et al., 2021). The Pew Research Center estimates that 75 million people in India dropped below a \$2 per day poverty line in 2020, whereas in China, only one million did so (Kochhar, 2021), although 30 million people in China did fall into the low income category of those living on between \$2 and \$10 per day.² Elsewhere, Oxfam (2021) has pointed to significant rises in the numbers living in extreme poverty, whereas the world's richest 1,000 billionaires increased their wealth by \$3.95 billion in 2020—evidence of growing inequalities between 'centres' and 'peripheries' as well as social groups. In addition to inequalities between countries, inequalities within them have also been exacerbated, both spatially and socially along lines of gender, race and class (e.g., Gras & Hernandez, 2021, this issue; Haas et al., 2021; McBurney et al., 2021, this issue; Ruthven, 2021, this issue). And along with the racialized and gendered inequalities driven by dispossession and exploitation, authoritarianism have deepened in a number of countries—sometimes separately, often in combination.

²Of the 75 million in India who had fallen into poverty, 35 million had previously been living on between \$2 and \$10 per day, and 32 million on between \$10 and \$20. In China, of the 30 million who had fallen into the low-income category 10 million had previously been living on between \$10 and \$20 per day and even more, 18 million, had been living on between \$20 and \$50.

2 | UNEVEN AND COMBINED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 BETWEEN AND WITHIN COUNTRIES

2.1 | Migrant and agricultural labour

The degree of Covid-19's uneven impacts is well illustrated by the contrasting fortunes of the world's two most populous countries. Zhang and Hu (2021, this issue) state that Covid 19's impact in rural China was short-lived, concentrated in one province and moderate in severity. Alone among G-20 countries, the Chinese economy began growing again in the second quarter of 2020, with its summer grain harvest breaking records (Zhang & Hu, 2021, this issue). And despite being a major importer of feed and oils, China maintains a high level of domestically produced food staples, which increases its ability to control food prices (Zhang & Hu, 2021, this issue). Beijing claimed that 97.3% of migrant workers in the country were back at work in the cities by the end of June, with one source suggesting that the total number of rural migrant workers in 2020 fell by only 1.8% to 286 million. In Zhang and Hu's (2021, this issue) fieldwork village, wage-labourers who commuted to nearby towns faced minimal disruption, whereas migrants to remote cities were confined to home villages for only 3 weeks, with some receiving reduced wages and/or less work on their return. The unevenness of the impacts, as Zhang and Hu put it, related to 'positions ... in the circuits of capital, labour and commodities'.

In India meanwhile (Kaur & Kaur, 2021, this issue; Ruthven, 2021, this issue), a sudden lockdown left tens of millions migrant workers stranded in the cities without work or income. Many could not get home, and the state did little to meet their needs. As we write this, India is facing a devastating second wave that its already threadbare and largely privatized healthcare systems are ill-equipped to cope with. Meanwhile, its public distribution system, which delivers heavily subsidized food grains to tens of millions of households, is slowly being undermined by the neoliberal extremism of its Hindu chauvinist regime.

In Ecuador, Kichwa migrants from the highlands lost work in lowland plantations and returned home, bringing a spike in Covid-19 infections and some of the world's highest morbidity rates (McBurney et al., 2021, this issue). In Uganda, the closure of intra-regional transport meant that most migrant workers in Kampala saw out lockdown in the city. Construction work ground to a halt, but many street vendors continued to operate part-time with fewer customers and lower incomes that picked up again in the second half of 2020. In rural Uganda, the initial shut-down stymied many farmers' access to markets and sent incomes tumbling downwards for a time although some food-crop producers mitigated the impacts to a degree by increasing local sales (see also Clapp & Moseley, 2020, p. 17). A survey of all 101 households in an east Ugandan village in December 2020 indicated that the impact on agricultural labourers may have been longer-lived because small farmers and petty commodity producers had increased usage of their children's labour during the 12-month school shutdown, thereby reducing the amount of wage-labour.³ The little work that did come labourers' way was paid with lower wages, more slowly, and sometimes not paid at all. Preliminary studies of Uganda have also indicated increased violence against children and disproportionate material impacts on women (Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020; Ssweranja et al., 2020).

2.2 | Small farmers and petty commodity producers

The unevenness of impacts among small farmers is a recurring theme. In Zhang and Hu's (2021, this issue) fieldwork, village petty commodity-producing grain farmers were largely unaffected (in part due to when lockdown struck in the agricultural calendar), whereas poultry farmers with more time sensitive ties to nearby market centres took a bigger hit. Pig farmers, with longer production cycles and larger stores of feed, fared better, whereas fruit and vegetable

³Our data source for this is limited to one village surveyed by one of this paper's authors. Street vendors and construction workers were interviewed in Kampala by the same author in late 2020 and early 2021.

producers, like maize and bean farmers in eastern Uganda, compensated their loss of access to market towns through increased sales within the countryside. Kenyan horticultural producers embedded in global commodity chains, and largely dependent on passenger planes for swift access to European markets, fared less well, whereas West African cotton farmers saw demand plummet during a global hiatus in textile production (Clapp & Moseley, 2020, p. 1402).

McBurney et al.'s (2021, this issue) study of highland Chimborazo—Ecuador's most Kichwa and one its most impoverished provinces—pours cold water on more optimistic prognoses of possible gains for small farmers stemming from moves towards food sovereignty and more localized markets. Such a shift, they argue, is obstructed by broader structural inequalities rooted in skewed distributions of land as well as power imbalances along commodity chains. Potato and onion farmers selling locally weathered the Covid-19 storm relatively well, but grain producers selling into longer commodity chains were squeezed by the broader dynamics of competition and the appropriations of merchants and traders whose hand had been strengthened by disrupted access to markets. In Ecuador, farmers with less than 5 hectares own 20% of the land and produce nearly two thirds of the country's food. Eighty per cent of the land belongs to agribusiness.

In Argentina, farmers in more remote locations faced reduced access to markets, whereas some of those living closer to cities expanded direct sales to urban consumers (Gras & Hernandez, 2021, this issue). The latter strategy fits with broader calls for the 'territorialization' of agricultural commodity chains and for agro-ecological strategies that reverse the commercial input dependence of agricultural monocultures with its magnified vulnerability to pests, and its propensity to catch smaller operators in long-term debt. It remains to be seen whether such initiatives add weight to long-established calls for a recalibration of food regime power dynamics away from large capital and towards small farmers (Altieri & Nicholls, 2020; Clapp & Moseley, 2020), or whether such moves are too limited to have much impact—both by power structures and the scope to benefit poor urban households or landless rural ones. They would also, as Gras and Hernandez (2021, this issue), require support from governments that in many cases have close relationships with the large agribusiness companies that would lose out from such changes.

2.3 | Large capital/agribusiness

Agribusiness has seen its share of the value produced in world agriculture grow markedly over recent decades (Clapp & Moseley, 2020). And over the past year (to May 2021), global indicators of profitability such as the Standard and Poor Global Agribusiness Composite Index continued to be positive.⁴ A number of studies, including contributions to this symposium, indicate that Covid-19 may have further entrenched agribusiness's position and possibly accelerated its upwards trajectory. McBurney et al.'s (2021, this issue) suggestion that agribusiness's position in Ecuador—including a jump in prawn and banana exports at the peak of Covid-19's first wave—has been further strengthened at the expense of petty commodity producing small farmers resonates with the paper on Argentina (Gras & Hernandez, 2021, this issue). In Argentina, agribusiness is a major economic and political player in a country where agri-exports make up a significant share of GDP. Agribusiness has strong connections to government, political parties and the media and spans finance as well as agri-industrial production, processing and trade. Its gains over the longer-term are demonstrated by the increasing inequality that has seen the total number of farmers decrease by 40% in the three decades to 2018 and a more than 45% increase in average farm-size (Gras & Hernández, 2016). And in 2020, although unemployment, underemployment, poverty levels and food insecurity all rose, 'agro-industrial exports increased by 5.2% in volume' between January and November (Gras & Hernandez, 2021, this issue). During 2020, Argentinian agribusiness signed a memo of understanding to supply China with 900 000 tonnes of pork from 25 large-scale farms—something that will require production of nearly 3 million tonnes of maize and soy and, it is

⁴S&P Global Agribusiness Composite Index—S&P Dow Jones Indices (spglobal.com), accessed 23rd May 2021.

claimed, a doubling of greenhouse gas emissions. More generally, large-scale agribusiness has continued to increase its control over natural resources in Latin America, where deforestation rates remained high during 2020 with the loss of cover particularly severe in Amazonia, putting further strain on the reproduction of indigenous communities (Lopez Feldman et al., 2020).

3 | POLITICAL IMPACTS

Politically, the period since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has seen dominant actors entrench their position, as well as instances of counter-moves. India's Farm Laws of 2020 aimed to expand the role of agribusiness and large capital in every aspect of Indian agriculture, triggering a widely documented wave of mass resistance from sections of petty agrarian capital and elements of classes of labour (Shrimali, 2020). On the one hand, some governments, like those of India and Ecuador (McBurney et al., 2021, this issue),⁵ have tried to use Covid-19 as a moment to double-down on neoliberal reforms and also to entrench political authoritarianism. Despite instances of resistance, as in Bolivia, intense forms of state violence and oppression have remained widespread, and the policing of the pandemic and widespread restrictions on demonstrations has further increased state power.

On the other hand, some view the apparent heightening of capitalism's contradictions as increasing possibilities for counter-moves against its gendered and racialized oppressions—encouraged, perhaps, by some increase in forms of solidarity and cooperation. For some, this push-back against global capitalism primarily requires an internationalisation of resistance by classes of labour (e.g., Dutta et al., 2020). Exactly what this might entail is open to debate (see Pleyers, 2020). Ruthven (2021, this issue) talks of Indian workers disentangling themselves from a 'failed formality', indicating that the largely unsuccessful struggles of workers for rights reproduces the status quo through patronage and small gains that shore up inequality more than challenging it and distract from more autonomous forms of agency and collective action that may have a greater chance of subverting the existing balance of class forces.

For others, the push-back against global capitalism means localizing economies and food systems (e.g., Altieri & Nicholls, 2020). Another, not necessarily incompatible view, is that the pandemic has demonstrated the capacity of strong states to ward off price spikes or merchant profiteering by maintaining high levels of domestic production of staple foods and regulating to that end (see Zhang & Hu, 2021, this issue). For others still, a first step in addressing the deprivations of contemporary capitalism experienced most crudely by women, ideologically and politically constructed racial minorities, and hundreds of millions of informal precarious workers and so-called surplus populations, lies in offsetting the further erosion of public reproductive labour and reduced wage-based incomes through a Universal Basic Income (e.g., Marais, 2020). UBI's proponents suggest that its implications are political as well as material because, by partially decommodifying the basis of simple reproduction, it reduces dependence on capital and can thereby crank up the working class's political leverage.

Others underline the self-organization of classes of labour for more directly transformative objectives. It is now argued more widely than ever that the struggles of classes of labour require networked collective action that encompass struggles for healthcare, education and key reproductive services as well struggles in the workplace (e.g., McNally, 2013). The 'commodification, privatization, and financialization of social reproduction needs to be halted' (Stevano et al., 2021, p. 282), and in those places where neoliberal neo-colonialism followed hot on the heels of colonial withdrawal, expenditure on healthcare and education needs to be increased until it is a public good for all. The ongoing epidemic of informal indebtedness in rural villages around the world is testimony to the threadbare provisioning of public services, the under-payment of scare wages and the unequal distribution of land and others bases of reproduction.

⁵The March 2021 election of a neoliberal President looks set to deepen this trend in Ecuador.

4 | CONCLUSION

When we circulated the call for papers for this symposium around a year ago, in the early days of the pandemic, we gave it a title of 'Covid-19, Capitalism and Crisis'. There was a crisis within capitalism, but capitalism reproduces itself in crisis. Some of the ways in which it has done so over the last year or so are touched upon in this symposium. Some individual capitalist enterprises have disappeared, with clear costs for their workers, but in most cases the abrupt closure of worksites and the seizing up of commodity chains was only ever going to be temporary. The impacts have varied across countries and across segments of capital. Big pharma, big tech, finance and agribusiness either never suffered a contraction or expanded their reproduction after a brief hiatus. Other segments of capital continue to face problems but will rebound in time, even while further individual enterprises collapse. This is not a definitive crisis of capitalism but a temporary somewhat distorted acceleration of its competitive dynamics. There has been restructuring and concentration of capital in fewer hands, with implications for forms of accumulation and power dynamics in particular sites and at different points of value chains. The Covid-19 crisis will have long-lasting impacts, and the socio-ecological crisis of capitalism of course remains unresolved, but capitalism itself has not entered a qualitatively new struggle for survival.

Rural-rooted classes of labour—be they petty commodity producing farmers, agricultural labourers or circular migrants between the countryside and the city—have in many cases seen their material conditions worsen. Street vendors in many countries still have lower incomes, wages have declined globally (ILO, 2020, p. 15) and capitalism's growing crisis of simple reproduction is not about to go away. 'Surplus populations'—be they strategically significant to capital or not—will remain, in spite of the brutal violence of capitalism in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia or Myanmar, and its everyday grinding down of poorer less powerful households within and beyond rural villages.

Inequality, already amplified by neoliberal extremism, has got that much worse. And sections of capital continue to cling to their commanding heights by nudging government allies to greater acts of oppression. Optimists see the possibility for progressive ruptures amongst the tensions generated by these depredations, whereas pessimists look into the future and see more of the same: the violence of capitalism and its relentless appropriation of natural resources and labour in all its forms. This pessimism, though, in no way diminishes a belief in the urgent need to try to drive forward a collective politics led by informal labour, petty farmers, women, migrants and ethnic minorities that cross-cuts the rural and urban, the productive and reproductive spheres, and is based on local organizing embedded in larger networks. In that sense the Covid-19 pandemic has changed nothing—neither as it continues to unfold nor when it finally fades away.

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How to cite this article: Pattenden J, Campling L, Castañón Ballivián E, et al. Introduction: Covid-19 and the conditions and struggles of agrarian classes of labour. *J Agrar Change*. 2021;21:582–590. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12440>